# CHILDREN AND SEPARATION

(Taken from Operation Ready: The Army Family Readiness Handbook)

Some say children are relatively unaffected by their father's absence, but studies show that is not true. Children probably experience the same psychological pattern as their mothers, due to their own feelings of loss and their awareness—conscious or unconscious—of the mother's emotional situation. Generally, they're upset when their mother is upset, and they're calm when she is calm. Children often test mom to find out if she will bend more when dad's gone, especially when he first leaves and again upon his return.

Some women compensate for their husband's absence by becoming permissive or overly protective with their children. Rules change. Some decisions are harder to make alone, so the mother may not be able to make clear-cut decisions. The children are being subjected to a different environment. They become caught between two worlds—juggling their behavior according to whether or not their father is home.

Both partners must be consistent in their discipline. They should decide on the rules and who is responsible for what area of discipline. Some fathers become "one of the kids" and expect the wife to be the disciplinarian. Sometimes, the mother essentially leaves the children without a parent at all by deferring decisions until the husband gets home: "Just wait until your Dad gets home. You're gonna get it!" Obviously, this sets up the returning father as the heavy, and it colors what could be a joyful reunion with fear.

## Children and Their Feelings

When the father returns, children behave in a variety of ways—with happy hugs, kisses, and squeals of welcome, but also with feelings of hurt, anger, resentment, and hostility. Child psychologists say all children have both positive and negative feelings toward returning parents. That's okay, as long as the feelings are dealt with honestly.

"Children need stability," says one military counselor. "Look at it this way. If one of the two most important people in your life were constantly coming and going—here two weeks, gone two weeks, home two days, gone again—wouldn't your security be shaken a little? Imagine what it does to the children"!

With their father gone, children often become the main focus of the mother. But what happens when he returns and she becomes a wife again? The child often feels he or she is not "number one" anymore and has to take second place—physically and emotionally. Insecurity, loss of status, and change in routine all add up to two strong emotions: hurt and anger directed at father. Children also feel love, pride, need, and security. The mixed feelings leave them confused, unable to understand what's happening to them.

Children express their feelings in different ways, and their outward behavior is not always a good reflection of what's going on emotionally. Some children cover up their true feelings; others are more open. A child's rejection, even if it is subtle, can be devastating to a returning parent. Some psychologists say part of a child's negative feelings toward a father may be a reflection of his mother's attitudes, suppressed by the wife but sensed by the children.

Helping a child cope with the emotions of separation requires that the family be open to the honest expression of feelings. These steps will help children cope—even when there appears to be no conflict. Pass the steps on to the FRG volunteers and other family members.

**Predeployment Suggestions**

Before deployment, spend time explaining, at the child's level, why you are going, where, with whom (for example, with Mary's Dad), and for how long you will be gone. Sit down with the whole family and talk about your feelings. Let family members express how they feel about the separation. Talk about what will happen when dad (or mom) is gone and what will be different when he returns. Let the older children relate their assessments of previous deployments to younger children—how long it seemed, what they did, how they felt while one parent was away and when he or she returned. The departing parent should spend time individually with each child—play a game, go for a walk, or go out for an ice cream cone—just the two of you. Take a picture of each child with the parent who is about to leave.

During deployment, display pictures of the missing parent at the child's eye level. Let each child have a picture of him or herself with the missing dad or mom in their room. Routine is important. Keep the same rules and family schedule. The children need the stability of unbroken routine. But make opportunities for special outings, especially on weekends and holidays when both parents would usually have been home (picnics, breakfast at McDonald's, visits to historic sites, building a bird feeder together). Encourage writing letters to dad or mom, and enclose schoolwork or drawings. Have the missing parent write a separate letter to each child occasionally, mailed in a separate envelope. That extra postage is well worth it! The parent can also read stories and talk to the children on tape.

Have each child choose a chore that the absent parent usually does. It will be a special contribution to maintain the house and will help develop responsibility. Praise them for their efforts. Keep in touch with teachers. Work together to evaluate, avert, or redirect unusual or negative behavior. Discuss with the children the fact that people do change, so after a long period of separation they may see some changes in their parent. They will adjust better to the changes if they are explained, and these explanations will help them to understand that the seemingly "strange" behavior does not mean their parent does not love them.

## Children and Reunion

Make reunion a family event; mom and dad can vacation alone later. Expect some anger and insecurity from the children. Talk about the negative feelings as well as the good ones. The returning parent might arrange a date with each child to reestablish the relationship. He or she may have to court the children, as well as his or her partner. Spend as much time as possible as a family, without outsiders, at the beginning. Postpone visits with relatives and dinner parties with friends for a few days.

## The Seven Myths of the Absent Father

Leonard J. Lexier, M.D., has identified seven common themes that typify the myths parents use to cope with the stress of father absence. (Some of these myths may apply equally well to mother absence.) These myths and consequences are described below. Awareness of these myths and their consequences can provide a foundation for pertinent family programs and are useful for FRG volunteers to understand. Consider including them in an FRG workshop on separation.

*Myth #1: Physical separation means emotional disengagement. Fathers are singled out, both by themselves and by families, as the cause and cure of many childhood disturbances.*

It is difficult to reconcile love of work and love of family, but it is especially difficult for fathers when their work entails physical separation. Analysis of the most successful military families reveals the common ability of the spouse to keep the father emotionally present at home during periods of physical separation. These mothers and fathers also have noncompetitive relationships. Fathers, even though physically separated, maintain an active and highly emotionally charged relationship with their children. The success with which a father's interest and his loving attachment are communicated to the child in large measure dictates the outcome of the child's emotional development.

If a disturbance arises requiring psychological evaluation and intervention, one of the most common fantasies heard from fathers is that a change in location or assignment will provide the "cure." This is a reflection of the guilt felt that somehow the father, and by extension the military, caused the problem in the first place. Dr. Lexier has observed fathers who leave active duty out of concern for their families, only to discover that this was neither the cause nor the cure. As a result, they now have an additional burden of job dissatisfaction.

*Myth #2: Anger is not an acceptable part of a child's love relationship with the father.*

When faced with the upset over the father's impending separation, the direct verbal expression of anger is not tolerated by many of the fathers, nor is the anger seen as a normal reflection of the child's love. This can lead to the anger being displaced into other parental relationships, especially onto adults at school. Returning fathers do not anticipate that the process of reunion would release feelings of anger associated with the initial separation. They have little ability to predict this reaction nor can they understand this behavior. They tend to see the behavior as defiance of teacher or parental authority and challenge to the father's position. A wise father will recognize and accept these expressions of angry feelings for what they are and tolerate them as natural and normal.

*Myth #3: "You have to be there when the keel is laid but not at the launching," that is, the father's presence is not necessary to the child's growth and development.*

This myth is frequently coupled with the idea that fathers play an insignificant role in the mental development of their children. The net effect that these myths have had for some men is that they feel more like uncles to their children than fathers. This was especially true for soldiers during the Vietnam period, when tours extended for periods of time of up to 13 months.

*Myth #4: The human mind, in terms of feelings, works like a wall switch that is either "on" or "off."*

This myth says the human psyche has the ability to make almost instantaneous adjustments to different situations, much like an on-off light switch.

It would be more accurate to compare the mind to a rheostat or dimmer switch. How fast a person adjusts to changes in his or her environment depends a lot on his or her personality and emotional makeup. Often, following an extended deployment, both husband and wife underestimate the amount of time needed to shift back to a normal family environment.

Both expect the other to be well rested, emotionally and sexually available, and eager to pick up the relationship where it left off at the time of deployment. For example, the Navy wives Dr. Lexier studied had no concept of the number of inspections and drills required to bring a nuclear armed and driven ship into port. Wives also had little knowledge of the "channel fever" that lasts the 48 hours before making port.

Husbands fail to appreciate the intense excitement and anxiety that their return evokes in spouses and children. Some men have described how they would try to get their children out of the way: “Tell the kids that you threw 25 half dollars on the lawn and that they cannot come in until they find all 25. But only throw out 24.” Men’s expectations center on noncompetitive possession of the wife. Some men in this study expected that the children would be sent to neighbors for the first 48 hours after their return. Both husbands and wives expect to adjust to the presence of the other in a few days. Actually, the period of adjustment can take as long as six weeks, depending on the length of separation.

*Myth #5: A good father’s major contribution to the family is being a strict disciplinarian, capable of straightening out problems that arise during his absence.*

The flip side of this myth is the idea of a good mother and wife who allows the returning father to make changes in the family routine so he can reestablish himself as the head of the household.

Fathers and mothers have little sense of how changes in family routine affect their children. Furthermore, they do not see the connection between male children’s negative attitude toward women and the father’s tendency to belittle the woman’s effort to manage the family during periods of father absence.

*Myth #6: Fathers have little to do with the education of children, especially during the elementary school grades.*

This concept has led fathers not to have predeployment conferences with teachers nor familiarize themselves with the anticipated course of instruction that their children will receive. Planned father–teacher conferences via mailed material from the classroom teacher are not arranged, and fathers are called upon only during times of academic or behavioral difficulties.

*Myth #7: Physical affection is not necessary as the children enter pubescence.*

Withdrawal of physical affection at the time of the daughter’s puberty is typically seen as the cause for running away and other antisocial behaviors. Inconsistency of parental expectations and disagreement on rules and limits are associated with many behavioral disturbances. Adolescent males who historically over-idealized their father when they were younger have greater difficulties resolving the negative connotation placed on their close emotional relationship with their fathers. Often, the result is manifested as severe school underachievement and dropout, along with heavy alcohol and marijuana use. This is especially true of those adolescents whose fathers had highly successful military careers.

It is obvious that Army fathers have a concern for their children. What they need are programs that enhance the relationships between military parents and their children. Unit leaders, chaplains, and DCA personnel can collaborate in creating programs to enhance fathering skills and therefore improve family life in the Army.

**Wartime Separation of Mothers and Children: Lessons from Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm**

*by Penny F. Pierce Ph.D., RN, Assistant Professor, The University of Michigan School of Nursing, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Catherine L. Buck, M.S.W., The Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan*

*Executive Summary*

Children whose mothers deployed during the Persian Gulf War (Operations Desert Shield and Storm) experienced a number of social and psychological stressors associated with this life disruption. Despite this experience during the deployment, these children typically did not show evidence of lasting effects. For example, two years later, children whose mothers were deployed did not, as a group, demonstrate more symptoms of stress than children whose mothers were not deployed. When children's adjustment was measured two years after the war, their wartime behavioral problems were not predictive of subsequent behavioral problems. The results of this study indicate that maintaining a stable environment is a key determinant of children's adjustment during wartime maternal separation.

*Introduction*

An unprecedented number of women were mobilized to support Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. This mobilization captured the attention of the media as mothers in uniform exchanged their farewells with young children and infants. For the first time in our Nation's history, large numbers of mothers of dependent children joined the ranks of soldiers, sailors, and airmen to serve their country in time of war.

Throughout the media, concerns were raised about the effects that such a separation might have on the servicemembers' combat readiness and the physical and emotional welfare of the children left behind. At the time, there was little information about maternal wartime separation and children's well being.

This study was conducted, in part, to describe the impact of a mother's military deployment on her children by providing a variety of information about the experience. Data were collected from 263 mothers (71% enlisted and 29% officers) who ranged in age from 19 to 51 (mean age of 34) with an average of two children (mean age was 7 years). The study was conducted two years after the war. Data were collected about events at the time of the war, about children's responses to those events, and about their adjustment by the time the study took place.

We now have important information about the type and number of changes in children's lives during the war, the amount of difficulty mothers experienced in arranging care for their children, as well as the symptoms of distress exhibited by these children.

### *Changes in Children's Lives*

Unlike previous wars when fathers left the family and mothers retained the task of providing a stable home life, many children of Desert Shield and Storm mothers experienced exceptional disruptions in their lives and daily routines. One focus of this research was on the changes in children's lives and their reactions to those changes.

### *Difficulty Providing for Children*

The disruptions in children's lives and routines were stressful not only to the children but also to the mothers who had struggled to make hurried arrangements. Providing adequate care and supervision often meant placing the child with the mother's ex-husband, parent, or adult sibling in another geographic area. Mothers were asked how difficult it had been to arrange comprehensive care for their children during their absence. Comprehensive care was assessed across several domains: financial, physical, emotional, social, and educational. The study also explored the conflict mothers experienced between providing adequate care and fulfilling military responsibilities.

### *Children's Behavioral Adjustment*

The measure of children's behavioral stress used in this research evaluated anxiety, tension, aggression, impulsivity, withdrawal, social conflict, inattention and inability to concentrate, nervousness, restlessness, impatience, sadness and depression, explosive or unpredictable behavior, frustration, irritation, and worrying.

*Implications for Family Support Before, During, and After Deployment*

The study of war-related stressors and the adjustment that follows can add to our general understanding of how military families can best be supported to remain intact and psychologically healthy. Understanding the factors that contribute to both successful and unsuccessful adjustment is essential before we can provide family support during turbulent separations and reunions. *The results of this study indicate that maintaining a stable environment is a key determinant of children's adjustment during wartime maternal separation.*

This study suggests five ways to work toward this objective:

1. Support services traditionally provided for spouses could be made available to extended family members caring for children of deployed mothers. This would allow servicemembers to perform their duties with less anxiety about children they have left behind.
2. Non-military family members may need specialized support to be able to fully utilize existing resources. This is particularly important for Reserve and Guard members who may not live near a military installation where resources are readily available.
3. Outreach programs would be extremely useful to non-military family members who find themselves in the position of having to negotiate the personal affairs of the deployed mother.
4. Predeployment briefings to designated family members regarding the psychological care of the child would be invaluable.
    # Assisting caregivers in providing age-dependent information concerning the mother's location, job, and safety would be very helpful in reducing some of the anxieties children have.
    # Providing guidance on ways to ease the transition of children who have to leave their home and stay with a relative would be particularly useful.
5. Use demographic and deployment-related factors to identify families for whom special interventions may be needed. Factors significantly related to an increase in children's behavioral stress responses include:
    # Children whose mothers were deployed to the combat theater
    # Families with more than one child
    # Extended length of deployment to the combat theater
    # Multiple disruptions in the child(ren)'s lives
    # Children of Reserve or Guard mothers
    # Children over the age of 8

The results of this study suggest that any effort to reduce the disruptions in children's lives when mothers are called to duty are likely to reduce the negative impact of the separation on the well being of dependent children. Other efforts toward providing instrumental help, such as childcare, financial support to cover additional expenses, and emotional support in caring for the children should be addressed. Parental strain that accumulates from feelings of guilt and the burden of deployment-related family stressors contributes to the poor mental health of the mother, which in turn, adversely affects the children's well being.

This study, in its entirety, is available through the Marywood Military Family Institute's website (http://mfi.marywood.edu). *The Research Digest, Volume 2. No. 2.*

**Backgrounder: Dealing with Separation**
*by Dr. Linda Alpert*

Many mothers dread the long separations from their husbands that is part and parcel of life in the military. [This applies to husbands anticipating their wives' leaving, too.] Why? Listen to what Mary Ellen had to say: "I have trouble with my children when my husband is away on assignment. They just won't listen to me like they do to him. When he's home, anytime the kids won't obey me, he steps in and makes them mind. When he's away, they just run wild."

Mary Ellen is not alone. "My kids won't listen" is the cry from Connecticut to California. Let's set the record straight right now. Moms are every bit as capable as dads at effectively disciplining kids. The problem is that through the decades of "wait until your father gets home," many dads have developed discipline strategies that many mothers haven't learned to use. Let's look at some of these differences.

Men tend to dispense with words and action quickly; women tend to talk, nag, cajole, plead, remind, threaten, and bribe. But words are weak discipline tools. Using words to make kids mind is like trying to steer your car with your horn; it just won't work.

Another ineffective parenting technique moms are prone to use is the "rescue operation." Rescuing moms bring their kids' forgotten lunches to school, drive kids to ball practice when they miss the bus, take out the garbage themselves when the kids have gone to bed without doing it. The intention of these moms is usually laudable; they want to help their kids out of a tight jam. But the effect rescuing behavior has on kids overall is negative.

Overly sympathetic moms make the mistake of relaxing all the rules in times of stress, and long separations certainly qualify as stressful periods. All misbehavior is excused because the kids are under pressure, or unhappy, or upset. Mom does so much to compensate for kids' unhappiness that she robs them of the opportunity to learn to cope with stress while continuing to act appropriately in the world.

When you stop excusing, bailing, rescuing, and talking too much and start taking appropriate action, you will find that you can discipline your kids as well as dad.

Like many parents, you may need to learn what actions are appropriate and effective for coping with today's children. Pick up one of the many books available on the subject, or attend one of the excellent parent training programs offered by schools, family service centers, agencies, and religious organizations around the country. Group programs provide an excellent peer support group for adults as they learn new parenting skills.

Once you stop talking and take action, do it all the time. Don't rely on your husband to do it when he's around. Share the responsibility. In so doing, your kids will get used to the idea that mom means business when they step out of line, whether dad is home or away.

While dad is away on assignment, you'll also want to take some steps to help kids cope with the long separation. Helping your kids do this begins before dad leaves. With the whole family together, mark the dates dad will be away on a large hanging calendar. Once he is gone, take time each evening to mark off the day that is ending.

Count how many days dad has been gone to look ahead to his return. Relate the remaining days to tangible events in a child's life. "Dad will return in 50 more bedtimes." "After you see 12 more Cosby shows, Dad will be back." The calendar and references make time concrete and understandable for kids.

A map placed by the calendar makes it easy for kids to understand where dad is. Attach the map to corkboard or a bulletin board and use marking pins to show dad's location on any given day. You could even pin a wallet-size picture of dad to the map at the appropriate locations.

A way to help your kids before dad leaves is to make special good night and good morning tapes with personal messages and stories for each child to listen to. These tapes could be placed with a small, inexpensive tape recorder on a table next to each child's bed.

Beside each bed, too, place a recent picture of the child alone with dad. Add a small personal memento of Dad's to reassure your child that he will be coming

home. It could be a favorite tie, a piece of jewelry, or even a knick-knack that your kids know is important to dad.

While your husband is away, make him a real part of your daily life. Take a few minutes after dinner and have everyone contribute a few words about their day in a letter that will be mailed off once a week. If you prefer, make a “talking letter” with an audiotape. Accumulate a “family newsbox” in which kids put samples of their papers and art work brought home from school, placemats from restaurants if you eat out, news about the family pet, short summaries of family activities, even new jokes or riddles that someone has learned. Imagine the fun the whole family will have when dad returns and you look together through everything in the newsbox.

Most important of all, you can encourage the kids to share their feelings related to their father’ s absence. Unexpressed feelings often appear disguised as aggression and inappropriate behavior. The more the feelings can be voiced, the easier it is for kids to accept them and function normally. At different times, they may express sadness, anger, loneliness, and resentment. Don’t ever demand they be “strong” and hide tears. Listen to them; put your arm around them, and reassure them that whatever they feel is okay.

Another way to help your children during long separations is to increase what I like to call the “4 A’s of Parenting”: attention, appreciation, acceptance, and affection. Attention means “quality time” spent listening, talking, and doing things together. Appreciation is expressing thanks for specific tasks and behavior contributed toward the well being of the family. Acceptance implies letting kids know that they are liked just the way they are now, however imperfect that may be. And affection refers to all the physical and verbal ways you demonstrate your love for your children.

You can never give too much of the 4 A’s. You can’t spoil your child by listening too much or expressing love too often. During separations, you can double the A’s, triple them, go as high as you like. But at the same time, remember to take appropriate action when the kids misbehave.

A special kind of support for separated families is a “best friend family,” another family with kids approximately the same age as yours whose dad is also away on assignment. The purpose of this family is fun and support. Loneliness is decreased when we can play and talk with others in similar circumstances. Share meals often. Plan enjoyable weekend excursions, and celebrate birthdays, holidays, and special occasions with each other. Encourage the kids to talk openly about their feelings for their fathers and about the separation. Such sharing will happen naturally if you look at each other’s maps, calendars, and family newsboxes. The long separations won’t seem quite so harsh when there are others to share the wait.